



To the Student

This book has two main messages: Writing is hard. Writing is easy.

It's no secret that writing is hard—or at least that writing *well* is hard. Still, it's useful to explore the nature of that difficulty.

Imagine you are having a relaxed, interesting conversation with your best friend. You're in a comfortable room where you both feel right at home. You are both talking with great pleasure. You find you have lots to say because you like talking to this person who likes you and is interested in what you have to say.

Then someone else comes into the room and starts listening to the conversation. A friend. But quickly you feel that something is peculiar because this friend doesn't say anything, doesn't join in, only listens. It makes you feel a little funny, but you keep up your talking.

Then more people start coming in. Some of them are strangers and they don't say anything either: They just listen.

Then someone pulls out a tape recorder and starts recording what you say.

Finally your friend, even though she won't join in the conversation, starts quizzing you as you are talking and asks:

- "Are you really sure that what you are saying is interesting?"
- "Are you sure that what you are saying is right?"
- "Are you sure you understand what you are saying?"

And she doesn't just ask questions, she gives "helpful suggestions":

- "Make sure that what you say is well organized."
- "Think carefully about who is listening. Are you speaking in a way that suits these listeners?"
- "Watch your language; don't make any mistakes in grammar; don't sound dumb."

This is an allegory of writing. In writing, you must keep on putting out words, but no one answers or responds. You are putting out words for an audience but you don't know how they are reacting. You may know who the intended reader is (often someone who will *grade* your writing), but you don't really know who else *might* read it—who might find it lying around. You are trying to get your thinking right, your organization right, and your language right—all at the same time. And there are spelling and punctuation to worry about too.

No wonder writing is hard.

But we have another message: Writing is easy. Writing is easier than talking because it's safer than talking. For you can "say" something on paper and no one has to see it. If you've ever blurted out something wrong to the wrong person and wanted to bite your tongue off as soon as the words came out of your mouth, you know that you can never undo what you've spoken. But in writing you can blurt out anything and see what it looks like on paper and no one ever needs to see it. Even you don't ever have to see it again. Writing is safer than talking.

Writing lets you "talk" about any topic at all, even if you don't know anyone who is interested enough to listen. And there are certain things it's hard to talk about with anyone. Writing lets you "talk" to anyone—"tell them" anything—and you can decide later whether to show it to them.

People expect you to make sense when you talk; otherwise, they'll stop listening or think you're odd. But you don't have to make any sense when you write. You can go on and on forever when you write; you can't do that in speech because people will stop listening after a while no matter how much they like you.

Admittedly, in describing how easy writing is, we're talking about writing in itself, not about *good* writing. It gets harder when "good" enters the picture or when you're writing for a tough reader, particularly a tough reader who will judge the writing.

But even when your goal is to produce good writing for a harsh judge, you can *start out* this way, just writing for yourself. Afterward, it's not so hard to revise it and *make* it good. When you do all that easy writing, surprising amounts of it are already pretty good. Those parts that are *potentially* good but badly written are not so hard to fix up once you've got them down in one form or another. And the parts that are bad or useless are easy to drop. *What's hardest about writing is simply unnecessary: trying to get it right the first time.*

Behind what we've just said is the fact that writing requires two mental abilities that are so different that they usually conflict with each other: the ability to *create* an abundance of words and ideas; and the ability to *criticize* and discard words and ideas. To write well we need to be both generative and cutthroat. You probably know how frustrating it is trying to use both "muscles" at once: trying to come up with as many words and ideas as possible, while trying at the same time to make sure that none of them is wrong or weak. It's like trying to pat your head while you rub your belly. We get stuck. But we can get unstuck if we separate the two mental processes: We can think of more words and ideas if we hold off all criticism (as in

brainstorming); and we can be more critical and tough-minded if we have already piled up more words and ideas than we need.

In short, even though writing gets most of us into the pickle of trying to use two muscles that work against each other, it is writing that creates the ideal conditions for using those muscles one at a time.

About the Structure of this Book

Workshops

The workshops make up the main part of the book. They contain the activities and main writing assignments (one major assignment per workshop). Each workshop has a different focus and offers a different kind of learning experience. We believe that most of the learning will come from these workshop activities and assignments, not from any ideas or information we give. Twelve workshops are too many for one semester, but you might want to try your hand informally at those workshops your teacher leaves out.

Some of the workshops ask you to write something that builds upon what you wrote for an earlier one, but all the workshops can stand on their own. Whatever sequence of workshops your teacher uses, *make sure* to keep all your writing for your portfolio and for possible later use.

At the end of most workshops, we have included a section titled "Ruminations and Theory." In these sections we share some of the ideas that interest us most about writing, thinking, and language. We hope you'll join us as we explore. But we have no doubt that the main way you learn is by doing the workshop's activities, not by reading theory. We won't feel bad if you skip them.

Sharing and Responding

In 56 pages near the end of this book, we've explained all the good methods we know for getting feedback from classmates on your writing. It's easy to jump to this final section because all the pages have shaded edges. The ability to give responses to your classmates' writing and to get their responses to your own writing may be the most important thing you learn from this book. You can use these feedback techniques in pairs or in small groups. You can use them for all writing tasks, in school and out. We have a separate introduction to that section. ("Sharing and Responding" is also available separately, in print and online.)

Prologue and Appendix

The prologue is a "Writing Skills Questionnaire" that can help you learn much more from our book. Even if your teacher does not ask you to fill it out, you will find it useful. The appendix, "Writing under Pressure," is a series of pointers on handling essay exams and other kinds of stress situations.

We would like feedback on our book. Please tell us which parts work well for you and which parts don't. If you can tell us why, that's even better. Which aspects of your writing change and which aspects seem unchanged? In our workshops we're trying to issue invitations, not orders, but that's not easy in a school setting. We welcome your feedback about all this as well as about individual workshops and assignments. Maybe someday we'll revise this book, but our main feeling now is one we're sure you often feel about a writing task: relief at calling it done—at least for now.

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FROM: BEING A WRITER
BY PETER ELBOW +
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